Economic & Political WEEKLY

Hinduisation of Ambedkar in Maharashtra
Author(s): Gopal Guru
Source: *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 26, No. 7 (Feb. 16, 1991), pp. 339-341
Published by: Economic and Political Weekly
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/4397328
Accessed: 31/10/2014 10:51

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at
http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Economic and Political Weekly is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Economic and Political Weekly.*

http://www.jstor.org

This content downloaded from 202.41.10.30 on Fri, 31 Oct 2014 10:51:28 AM
All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions

Hinduisation of Ambedkar in Maharashtra

Gopal Guru

The co-option of Ambedkar into the Hindu fold is being carried out with considerable sophistication by the Hindutvawadi forces. In addition some Buddhists groups are doing their best to strip Ambedkar's ideology of its political content.

IN the centenary year of B R Ambedkar, dalit politics in Maharashtra is passing through a critical phase in which the dalit political identity which despite the recent abortive attempts as Morkhandikar (*EPW*, March 24, 1990) would prefer to call it, has dissolved itself into an infinite process of factionalism giving rise to more than a dozen dalit groups in the State. While there has been a continuous erosion of dalit corporate identity after Ambedkar on the one hand, on the other there have also been constant attempts on the part of the Hindu communal forces to 'Hinduise' Ambedkar for the subsequent assimilation of dalits into Hindu fold. Similarly some of the Buddhist organisations are busy spiritualising Ambedkar's Buddhism with a view to supplanting the need to look at Ambedkar's Buddhist conversion movement as an emancipatory, critical concern.

It is against this background it is relevant to ask why certain sections of dalits are being attracted towards the rightist forces of various kinds in the state? Why and how are these reactionary forces coaxing the dalits into Hinduising and spiritualising Ambedkar?

It is true that the recent dalit unity efforts, howsoever abortive they were, did achieve a little success at least on one account; that it moved one section of dalits away from certain Muslim fundamentalist forces in the state.[1] But at the same time the Hindutvawadi forces are trying to systematically coopt dalits into the Hindu fold. The cooption of dalits by these neo-Hinduist forces is being carried out with considerable sophistication and by shifting the emphasis on the strategies of Hinduisation of dalits. A few years ago the Hindutvawadi forces indulged in the crude condemnation of Ambedkar and of his writings, for instance the riddles of Rama and Krishna.[2] Shiv Sena still continues to represent this trend perhaps with a greater degree of cruelty involving killings of dalits, demolishing and disfiguring of pictures and statues of Ambedkar and Buddha and the character assassination of Buddha and Ambedkar in the most malign language.[3] It should not be out of place here to point out that the Shiv Sena in Maharashtra has adopted a new strategy to win over dalits into their scheme of Hinduisation of dalits. It is evident from the Shiv Sena's crude condemnation of Ambedkar and its threat of physical liquidation to Mahars neo-Buddhists combine, that it intends to single out for persecution this group who, by and large, are the followers of Ambedkar and his Buddhism. But it is trying to coopt other dalits such as Mangs, Chambhars and Dhors who are by and large more inclined towards Hinduism. The Shiv Sena does this cooption by absorbing these sections into its organisational structure and certain other opportunity structures which it happens to control in the state.[4] Moreover, the continuous grievance of Mangs who argue that the Mahars are responsible for monopolising the reservation benefits has also been exploited by the Shiv Sena to consolidate anti-Mahar-Buddhist feelings among the Mangs and Chambars in the State.

The RSS, the ABVP and their parent body BJP, do not however single out Mahars-Buddhists but on the contrary are keen and skilful in Hinduising these dalit sections of the population. This Hinduisation of dalits by the BJP ABVP-RSS combine operates at two levels. At the theoretical level, the BJP is trying to (mis)interpret Ambedkar's mode of thinking and argues that his act of conversion was in conformity with Hinduism rather than its subversion.[5] Also these neo-Hindu forces are attempting the convenient comparison of Ambedkar with Hedgewar and Savarkar and are showing how all these three tried to create common Hindu identity by overcoming the bad practices of caste and untouchability.[6]

The BJP and its ABVP student wing, in order to incorporate the dalits into their project of Hinduising Ambedkar, established the Samajik Samarasta Manch (social assimilation manch) in 1983 and are busy organising the Phule-Ambedkar 'Sandesh Yatra' (Message Yatra) from Pune to Nagpur, conducting a series of lectures and seminars and celebrating the Ambedkar centenary in the state. As a part of this strategy of Hinduising Ambedkar, the BJP-ABVP combine is also trying to coopt the dalits and the OBCs into its organisational structure. However, care is taken to induct only those dalits who had direct or indirect connections with either the ABVP or the RSS.

In the recently concluded State meet at Nashik in January 1991, the BJP has also chalked out a 25-point programme for the dalits.[7] Important among these points are abolition of caste and inequality, the demand for 'ek gaon ek panwatha' ('common village water source') and common crematory ground, the abolition of the obnoxious practice of carrying night soil loads, implementation of the reservation policy including the Mandal Commission and the renaming of Marathwada University after Ambedkar. The State BJP unit is also planning to implement this rather ambitious programme upto April 14, 1991, Ambedkar's birth anniversary. In order to mobilise the dalits around this programme, the BJP has also decided to organise 'samata parishads' in each district of the State between March 20 and April 14, 1991.

The impact of this BJP strategy on the dalits particularly their important intellectuals seems to be quite encouraging for the neo-Hinduists in the state. Some dalit intellectuals like Gangadhar Pantawane, a noted figure in the dalit literary movement in the state, and other dalit activists have joined not only the ABVP-sponsored Sandesh Yatra but are also reported to have shared the platform of Samarasta Manch on various occasions in the State and called upon the dalits to respect Savarkar, a Hindu nationalist, as they do Ambedkar.[8] These dalit intellectuals have also expressed the need for dalit assimilation but have been quite ambivalent about it because they do not explain with whom they want this dalit assimilation.[9] The irony is that these Hindu fundamentalist who were considered to be the most obscurantist elements by the dalits only some ten years ago have now come to enjoy some little but disturbing respect-

This content downloaded from 202.41.10.30 on Fri, 31 Oct 2014 10:51:28 AM
All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions

ability among not only dalit intellectuals but also dalit political activists in the State. This was evident when some noted dalit teachers like Gangadhar Pantawane, Manohar Garud, some teachers from the Ambedkar Physical Education College, Aurangabad and dalit corporators from Aurangabad enthusiastically welcomed the ABVP-sponsored Ambedkar-Phule Sandesh Yatra in Aurangabad in November 1989.[10] In this connection one should not lose sight of the fact that Ambedkar had established an educational complex called 'Nagsenvan' at Aurangabad with the intention of creating dalit intellectuals who would really disseminate the radical ideology among the dalits for negating the oppressive structure which the Hinduism represented.

While the honeymooning of Hindutvawadi forces with these dalits is influenced by several factors: one, the need to make inroads into the dalit constituency—the BJP, after its impressive electoral victory in the 1990 assembly elections in the State is encouraged more by the necessity to win over the dalits who form a critical strength in the electoral arithmetic in the State. Two, to salvage its image which very often is condemned as being casteists, and finally to realise its project of creating a Hindu Rashtra. It is with this motivation that the BJP is appealing to the dalits to overcome their secondary differences based on caste and untouchability and assimilate a common Hindu identity for fighting against the common enemy. However, this appeal for a common Hindu identity, in essence, has to be taken basically as an appeal for an identity opposed to dalits and minorities. It is in this context, therefore, that the BJP's support to SC/ST reservations and the Mandal commission needs to be understood.

The inclination of some dalits towards the neo-Hinduists forces concerned can be understood thus. First, the lack of political intervention both from the community in question, and also from the left and democratic forces, has led these dalits to join the camp of Hindu nationalist forces in the State. Second, there is a studied refusal on the part of the dalits to make any common cause with the left and democratic forces. This was evident when after his fall V P Singh and the left-forces were conducting public meetings in the State in support of Mandal Commission and appealing to people to counter the growing threat of communalism, these dalit leaders were busy sharing the ABVP-sponsored Samarasta platform. And finally, there seems to be a reluctance among these dalit leaders to look upon Buddhism as a liberation theology.

Against this background, the question that really needs to be confronted is whether Ambedkar really visualised the project of Hindu Rashtra? Did he consider the Hindus as a monolithic society as many of the recent-day Hindu nationalists seem to be suggesting? Was his Buddhist conversion in conformity with the Hindu tradition? Let us examine each issue separately. Did Ambedkar believe that Hindus were a nation? His answer to this question was categorically 'no'. His view was that Hindus could not become a nation or even a society. His arguments were: the Hindus did not possess the consciousness of the kind and what existed was the consciousness of caste which prevented communication and common activity in the Hindu society.[11] This also explains that Ambedkar never considered Hindu society as a monolithic one. Further, according to Ambedkar if the Hindu Raj did become a fact, it would no doubt be the greatest calamity for this country. No matter, he said, what the Hindu said, Hinduism was a menace to liberty, equality, fraternity and basic human rights and hence it was incompatible with democracy.[12]

Taking a clue from Savarkar, the Samarasta Manch and the Phule-Ambedkar Sandesh Yatra protagonists do speak of eliminating casteism and untouchability but only to reinforce Hindutva. But this position has an inherent contradiction in the sense that Hinduism and the caste and varna system are mutually dependent on each other and hence demolishing casteism means demolishing Hinduism which the Hindu protogonists hold very dear to their heart. Given the critical nature of this relationship between Hinduism and the caste structure will these neo-Hinduist forces be prepared to demolish caste at the cost of the demise of Hinduism? As far as Ambedkar's social project is concerned it was an attack on both casteism and Hinduism. Hence the clubbing together of Savarkar and Ambedkar is wrong because while the former wanted to undermine caste but protect Hinduism thus interlocking himself in the contradiction the latter wanted to resolve this contradiction by eradicating caste and renouncing Hinduism.

In their attempt to integrate Ambedkar into their scheme of Hinduism neo-Hindu forces further argue that Ambedkar's conversion movement was in complete conformity with Hindu culture and tradition. As a part of this claim they also consider Buddha as the ninth incarnation of Vishnu. If one looks at Ambedkar's ideology of Buddhism and his idea of conversion, one finds that he created a counter ideology in the form of neo-Buddhism thereby rejecting not only old Buddhism but also offered a dialectical undermining of Hinduism at the ideological level. It is in the same spirit that Ambedkar has progressively negated his 1920s protests which the present day neo-Hinduists are so tempted to exploit but often out of context. In fact, Ambedkar's religious protest of the 1930s was not a protest for Hindu reform; he used this protest as a strategy only to take up dalit struggle on a clearer political terrain. Similarly, his conversion movement in 1956 was a political strategy which involved political mobilisation of dalit masses directed at creating a counter-culture with political underpinnings for the negation of Hindu dominant culture. This forms the core of Ambedkar's ideological pursuit as well as his strategy and hence any attempt to assimilate Ambedkar into Hinduism would be a distortion of his emancipatory categories.

However, it is not only the Hindu fundamentalist forces that are tampering with the basic tenets of Ambedkar's ideology of Buddhism. In recent years some self-proclaimed Buddhist organisations with foreign connection have been constantly spiritualising the dalit masses in the State. The Trailokya Buddha Mahasangha is one such organisation having its headquarters in London. In India, its main centre of activities is at Pune while it has established regional branches at Bombay, Aurangabad, Wardha and Nagpur in Maharashtra and Ahmedabad in Gujarat. The stated objective of the sangh is to eradicate blind faith and ignorance among the dalit people and it claims to have a spiritual method for emancipating the dalit masses from their poverty and auguish. The 'spiritualisation' by the sangh takes place at two levels. One, the Sangh, through its mouthpieces like *Golden Drum* published in English from London and *Buddhayan* in Marathi and *Dhammamegh* in English, for the dalits in Maharashtra, tries to disseminate the spiritual content of Buddhism. Secondly, it also conducts the workshops of three to seven days duration. Normally organised in urban centres (though a few are in rural areas) and attended by educated middle class dalits. The participants have to observe the strict rules restricting their movement only to the place where the workshop is being conducted. During the entire course the participants are asked to undergo transcendental meditation to overcome material as well as mental problems. They, while in trance, have to chant the 'mantras' for the sake of their own

This content downloaded from 202.41.10.30 on Fri, 31 Oct 2014 10:51:28 AM
All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions

welfare, their relatives' welfare, their friends' welfare their neighbourers' welfare and finally even their enemy's welfare. All this is carried out in the name of Ambedkar and his Buddhism.

The serious implications of the sangh methods is to strip off the political content of Ambedkar ideology. This has been brilliantly brought out by Vinay Kamble in his scathing criticism of sangh[13] in *Dhammalipi* (a Marathi fortnightly). Ambedkar, in his major writings, attempted to show that Buddhism was a social philosophy concerned with fundamental problems like poverty, material want and exploitation. His Buddhism unlike that of the Trailokya Buddha Mahasangh, was based on conscious logic and had empirical moorings. And his conversion movement, though overtly cultural was inherently political inasmuch as it created among the dalits a tendency to negate the cultural domination of the upper castes. Ambedkar's attempt was to articulate this tendency of negation in the form of organised movement to be launched by Buddhists to find a solution to their problems outside the four walls.

But the Trailokya Buddha Mahasangh is doing exactly the opposite by confining the dalits within the four walls for ruminating on transcendental meditation which in effect is making the dalits quite insensitive to the problems of the dalits. This was evident when not one among the followers of the sangh protested against the government's decision to delete the 'Rama Krishna riddles' from Ambedkar's writings. Now the question is, did Ambedkar want the Buddhist monks and Buddhist followers to remain passive spectators to the exploitation of dalits as the sangh is intended to do? For an answer Ambedkar in one of his letters addressed to Sangharakshita in May 1950 (I suppose the man who is heading the present Trailokya Mahasangh is the same person to whom Ambedkar addressed his letter) says "the greater responsibility lies on the shoulders of the Bhikkus (Buddhist monks) if the attempt to revive Buddhism is to be a success. They must come out of their 'shell' and be with the first rank of the fighting force."

The growing Hinduisation and spiritualisation of Ambedkar and the dalit masses can be attributed to the receding Buddhist movement which despite the progressive scientific ideology, has failed to persuade the dalit from joining the neo-Hinduists and the growth of the reactionary Trailokya Buddha Mahasangh in the State. In this situation can we dispense with Buddhism? Perhaps not. As compared to other religions Buddhist categories are much more egalitarian and rational and hence have the capacity to effect the progressive mobilisation at the broader level. But there is a need to offer more progressive interpretation of contemporary Buddhism in Maharashtra. This has already been attempted by one of the leading Buddhist monks the late Bhadant Anand Kousalayyan.[14] In the same spirit and also as a part of the 'liberation theology' interpretation that Ambedkar gave in his *Buddha and Dhamma*, there is a need to reinterpret Buddhist Trisaran (Three Principles) as equality, fraternity and freedom from exploitation. Since this offers a common programme for the collective mobilisation of the oppressed from all the castes at the empirical level, Trisaran should be separated from Panchsheel (Five principles) which is related to the moral conduct of an individual. Because an insistance on the combination of Trisaran with Panchsheel would certainly deviate those oppressed from other castes who are otherwise ready to rally only round Trisaran. Thus, the observance of Panchsheel should be considered to be an individual matter. But unfortunately, the contemporary Buddhist leadership in Maharashtra still argues for the combination of Trisaran and Panchsheel which in effect, has led to the recession of Buddhist movement in Maharashtra and suspended Ambedkar's project of converting Hindu Indian into Buddhist Indian.

Notes

1 Before the dalit unity move in November 1989, Dalit Mukti Sena led by Jogendra Kawate, had joined Haji Mastan to create Dalit Muslim Suraksha Mahasangh. But when dalit unity attempts were made, he left Haji Mastan and joined Prakash Ambedkar and Raja Dhale in their move to create an anti-Congress Platform in the State.

2 W N Uptal, Sawarkar's follower from Pandharpur in Maharashtra had brought out the phamplet in Marathi called *Pratighat* in November 1987, condemning Ambedkar and Buddha. Similar criticism of Ambedkar also appeared in the Pune-based Marathi periodical *Kal* during the same period.

3 Shinde Pradeep, 'The Rise of the Backward Classes' *Bombay*, October 22, and November 6, 1991, p 123.

4 Morkhandikar R S, 'Dilemma of Dalit Movement in Maharashtra', *Economic and Political Weekly*, March 24, 1990, p 586.

5 These are H V Seshadri's (RSS secretary) expressions quoted in his 'Durdarshi Vihar' appearing in *Dr Hedgewar to Dr Ambedkar-Vichar Yatra* (ed Anand Hardikar, Shrimati Ramabai Anti Vikas Pratisthan Pune, 1991, p 68.) Similar opinion was also expressed by Dattopant Thengdi, an old guard of RSS, in *Kolhapur Sakal*, a Marathi daily, January 7, 1991.

6 For details regarding comparison between Ambedkar and Hedgewar please refer to Ambedkar, special number brought out by Shrimati Ramabai Anti Vikas Pratisthan, Pune 1991.

7 Uttam Kamble, 'BJP cha Chehar Badalnyacha Prayanla', (BJP is trying to change its face) *Kolhapur Sakal*, Marathi daily, January 12, 1991.

8 One of the noted dalit literary figures from Maharashtra Yeshwant Manohar criticised the dalit intellectuals who are comparing Sawarkar with Ambedkar, in the discussion on Dalit Panther, covered in Sharan Kumar Limbale ed, *Dalit Panther*, Sugawa Publications, Pune 1989, p 225.

9 Pantawane, Gangadhar, 'Viswas Wataila Hawa' (confidence should be developed) in Anand Hardikar (ed), Special No, Shrimati Ramabai Anti Vikas Pratisthan, Pune 1991, p 64.

10 An interview with Shataram Pandere, a prominant dalit activist in Marathwada region.

11 Moin Shakir, G N Sharma, *Politics and Society-Raja Ram Mohan Roy to Nehru*, Parimal Publications, Aurangabad, 1976, p 208.

12 Das, Bhagwan, *Thus Spoke Ambedkar*, Vol II, Buddhist Publishing House, Jalandar, p 86.

13 Kamble, Vinay, Dhammalipi, (Marathi fortnightly) (ed) Raja Dhale/Ramesh Dhaware, Bombay, January-March 1989.

14 Bhadant Anand Kousalyyam, *Buddh Dharma Ani Marxwad*, Translation, M F Ganjre Ashok Publications. Nagpur.

JANATA

A Journal of Democratic Socialism

Editor: H K Paranjape

Subscription rates

Annual Rs 75, Half-Yearly Rs 40

Life Rs 600 for Individuals and Rs 1,000 for Organisations

Janata, National House, 6 Tulloch Road, Bombay-400 039.

This content downloaded from 202.41.10.30 on Fri, 31 Oct 2014 10:51:28 AM
All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions